

Return *of the*

While bluewater anglers target king salmon offshore, and freshwater anglers fish for them in sweet water, most fly anglers overlook Alaska's estuaries, where these still-fresh anadromous gamefish linger before pushing upstream.

KING

Chinooks are at their angler-whipping best when you catch them in brackish water.

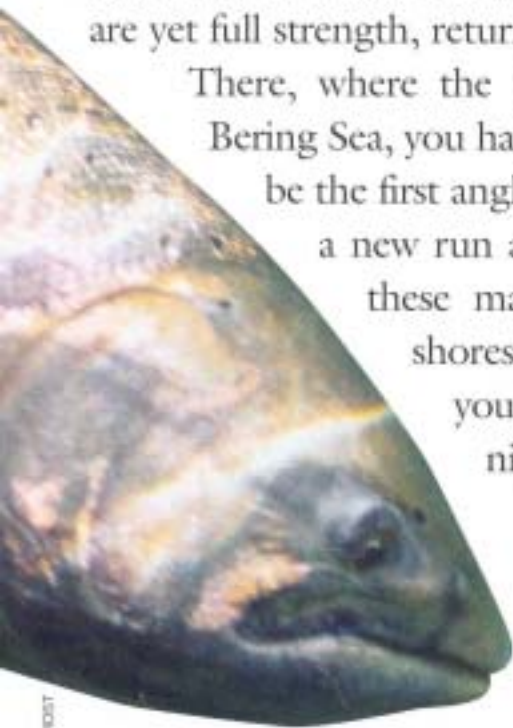
by Bob Stearns

Alaska's wilderness allures people who enjoy a combination of solitude and salmon fishing. The Last Frontier has plenty of both, but as its most famous rivers draw more anglers, finding salmon and seclusion is often difficult. But there's the Goodnews—southwestern Alaska tidewater, a stopover for king salmon that are yet full strength, returning from the deep, cold ocean.

There, where the Goodnews River empties into the Bering Sea, you have it—solitude and salmon. You can be the first angler to present a fly to the first fish of a new run and feel the undiminished fight in these magnificent kings. Along the wild shores of the Bering Sea, you'll think you're fishing in the waters of eternity for Nature's greatest gamefish.

The Goodnews, a medium-size river that experiences gigantic runs of very large kings, begins modestly in a small mountain lake of the same name some 80 miles inland. The river's last few miles, where it empties into Goodnews Bay and the Bering Sea, are some of the world's best tidewaters for big kings on a fly.

Perhaps 300 yards across at the widest of its maze of mouths, the Goodnews is a shallow stream of slow to moderate current (depending upon the tide), and the deepest holes are



RICHARD DROST



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typically shallower than 15 feet—truly a friendly environment for the fly fisher. The best news is that the Goodnews is remote (400 miles from the nearest paved road) and infrequently visited by anglers. In fact, the only way to fish here is from the one camp on its banks—the Goodnews River Lodge, located less than a mile upstream from tidewater.

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Ode to a King

After salmon fry migrate to the ocean, they spend five to seven years gorging on nutrient-rich prey such as crabs, shrimps, and herrings. And the fry grow. By the time a fish returns to its natal stream, its sheer size makes it worthy of the title, *king*. Goodnews River kings average 20 to 25 pounds, but 50-pound fish aren't uncommon.

The kings begin returning in late May, but they often hold in the tidewater for days, until the conditions (such as water flow and water temperature) trigger the run, which can last through July. Many fish vacillate between the confines of the river and the open sea before committing to the final leg of the migration—this seems to explain why some of the larger fish sport their spawning colors even while in salt water.

The salmon's vacillations afford anglers near the mouth of the Goodnews ample opportunity to put a fly in front of those fish. While kings in the Goodnews's tidal reaches may

no longer feed actively, they definitely haven't "unlearned" feeding. The strikes feel like you've suddenly hooked a passing Russian submarine.

Although they don't jump as acrobatically as silver (coho) salmon, many kings air it out, especially in the shallow, narrow reaches where they have nowhere to go but up. Others, however, just put their heads down and run like they're on fire. Either way, you're in for a contest.

Tides and Tactics

If the tide is low or there's no current at all, the best fishing often occurs in the center of the channel. Keep in mind that the strongest currents take place during the outgoing tide, which is reinforced by the natural flow of the river. But the strong push of an incoming tide can slow the downstream current to a stop or even reverse it, and this effect often makes fish moving upriver feel more comfortable in the middle of stream. Slow currents also make it easier to get a fly down to where the kings are moving or holding, which in slower water is typically about halfway down.

During periods of strong current, however, the fly angler looks for places where natural structure creates "softer" water, such as current seams and eddies. This angling requires masterly mending, reaching, and dredging. The fish that brave the strongest currents in the channels hug the bottom, and that behavior calls for the heaviest sinking lines and split shot.

For almost all situations, a 9- or a 10-weight rod suffices. Rod size is actually dictated more by the weight of the sinking line or shooting head than by the size of the fish. A 9-weight handles head weights up to 400 grains, but it takes a 10-weight to handle 500 to 700 grains. Still, it's a good idea to always have a floating line plus 200-, 300-, 450-, 550-, and 700-grain shooting heads handy. You can use either full fly lines or shooting heads. (See the sidebar, "Rigging to Go Deep," on our Web site.)

Tidewater shallows offer a rare opportunity to fish for salmon with a floating line. But the low, clear, relatively slow-moving water requires fine-touch presentations. A long leader (sometimes up to 12 or 15 feet) plus a weighted



BILL FURTON

WHERE TO GO

The rivers that flow into the Bering Sea are among the most productive ones for king salmon in Alaska. If you hit the peak of the season just right—which in that part of the world occurs in the last half of June through the third week of July—there are fish aplenty.

I've fished there via the Goodnews River Lodge for many years now, where it's not uncommon to hook 10 fish or more in a single day. These fish average 25 to 30 pounds, but every year I've managed to beach one or more that topped 50 pounds, plus a couple over 40 pounds, as well.

For more information on the Goodnews River Lodge, contact the owners at 4066 Wolf Lake Drive, Lewiston, MI 49756. Telephone (800) 274-8371 or send a fax to (888) 274-9778. You may also visit the lodge's Web site at www.epic-fishing.com. —B.S.

(Left) Tidewater casting is repetitive; guides anchor up in good position to ply seams and eddies. (Right) Bob Stearns holds a bright fish while surrounded by Alaska's sublime Bering-coast wilderness.



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streamer can be a deadly combination.

Whether you are fishing floating or sinking lines, the idea is to get the fly down to fish level, and you have to understand just how fast the fly-and-line combination sinks. Kings seldom go down to take even the most enticing fly, but their instinctive response prompts them to rise. So, pay special attention to the last part of the retrieve, and don't be in an all-fire hurry to launch that next cast. More than once I've had a big king chase my fly almost all the way to the surface before striking.

Tidewater Flies

Tidewater is almost always more turbid than freshwater reaches or even than the ocean. So here, kings like a much larger fly. Go with bulky, water-pushing flies with a lot of swimming action, such as marabou-and-bunny-strip streamers 3½ to 5 inches long, with some thin strands of flashy material (such as Flashabou or Krystal Flash) tied on top. Dumbbell eyes in various weights can be added to customize sink rates.

If I had to pick just one color, it would be a dark pink (that is, cerise). Other productive colors include black, orange, bright blue, bright pink, purple, chartreuse, and silver, as a single color or in various combinations. Because Bering Sea rivers rise and fall from 5 to 20 feet deep with the tides, bring a lot of heavy flies.

Because only just the right position will get the fly down to where the big fish hang, most of the best fishing occurs from an anchored boat. Whether you're fishing from shore or from a boat, the casting is repetitive. But the idea is to change flies and drifts in a process of elimination. Keep in mind that, for the most part, king salmon tend to respond

most aggressively toward a fly that moves, wiggles, and darts. You can catch a king hanging the fly in the current while someone hands you a cup of coffee, but the more action you give the fly by stripping, the more often it gets hit. Changing retrieve rates is also good idea.

A shock leader isn't necessary, but because these fish have amazing endurance (and because you don't want to spend forever trying to land one) use a strong tippet. You need at least 12-pound leaders, and if there's a lot of current, seriously consider 20-pound leaders. And never, never, never forget to retie the fly to the leader after each fish. An almost invisible nick right where the fly is knotted to the tippet equates to a lost fly. Don't trust only your eyes; it's all too easy to overlook a scratch in the mono when you're all tanked to catch the next fish.

Really big kings, especially those 40 pounds and up, are very difficult to bring to net, especially in a strong current. It's best to pull anchor and go to shore as soon as you feel the hookup is solid. Try to get down-current from the fish, so that it fights upstream. If a really big king gets too far below you downstream, bringing it back against even a moderate current can become an impossible task. In fact, it feels like you're pulling against the strength of the river pouring out into the ocean. I haven't yet had a fish pull me out to sea, but I can imagine it happening. Fighting these salt-strong fish, you can feel the awesome, combined powers of the river and sea that nurtured these spectacular fish. ■

Bob Stearns writes the "Boats" department in every issue of *Saltwater Fly Fishing*.

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